

The Indian Ocean has always been a highway enabling long-distance exchange and interactions. Archaeological researches date the beginnings of the Indian Ocean trade networks to the prehistoric period and highlight their wide-range nature. The trading activity started from the third-second millennium BC with maritime contacts between centres in the Persian Gulf and Gujarat as well as the mouth of the Indus. By the beginning of the Christian Era, those networks expanded to include almost the entire western Indian Ocean. This connectivity was possible due to the well-organized town planning, construction of jetties, harbours, and other marine facilities. Ports cities were, and still are, places where the local and the exotic, the foreign and the familiar, tradition and modernization meet.

The proposed project aims to explore the potential of coin finds as a tool for understanding the economic and social history of ancient port communities. More generally, its purpose is to create a narrative on creating and expressing the value in the specific type of ancient society through the study of the coin-use in the Western Indian Ocean ports. It aims to provide a new holistic view on how people inhabiting and visiting those settlements who were active in the sea and inland trade used coins. Therefore, the similarities and differences between various port communities in their attitudes towards coins will be explored. The processes through which value was attributed to objects will be examined as well. Last but not least, the project aims to investigate whether coin finds from particular types of settlements (port towns) can help with their categorisations.

The proposed study is significant because it concerns a topic that is both important and not well studied so far. Coins constitute a fascinating group of objects found at Indian Ocean port sites. Indigenous and foreign, they are being discovered in hoards, deposited in religious buildings, graves and residential structures or as stray finds. However, their common perception as indicators of fluctuations of trade and site prosperity resulted in relatively little interest in their roles beyond that of their economic value. The main reason might be the perception of their functions as self-evident: coins are money and a standardized medium of exchange, a unit of account and a store of value (wealth). However, the proper and more nuanced interpretation of coin finds can allow insight not only into the economy of the site but also into its social and political history. Coins can exist in several value systems, not only in those created by economic exchange, with one or the other aspect of the coins emphasised in different periods and contexts. They can be powerful social instruments, expressing relationships between places, things and people, which were not understood in terms of the exchange value of a coin.

The analysis of the worth and value of coins in port societies will provide further depth and texture to our understanding of social and economic practices in the Indian Ocean world. The research on coin-use at port sites as well as on issues concerning the construction of value will shed a new light on the holistic understanding of the social archaeology of ports as well as of the maritime cultural landscapes of the Western Indian Ocean. The issues addressed by the project will significantly broaden the spectrum of research undertaken by Polish numismatists, furthering the development of studies towards the geographical areas rarely scientifically explored by Polish researchers. The conclusions may also contribute significantly to the comparative analysis of the occurrence of similar phenomena in different cultures and different regions of the ancient world. The research will be carried out in five main stages and will cover creating databases and datasets of coin finds from studied ports, analysing coin finds, examining the value of coins in ports, comparing coin use and value in ancient ports, and creating the comprehensive synthesis on coin use and value in the Western Indian Ocean ports. The concept of value associated with the object agency and object biography approaches will provide theoretical frameworks on which the project will be based.